



## I AM IRONMAN

If you watched Phil Kessel gear up for a game in 2023, you'd wonder if certain pieces of his equipment were part of his ensemble on November 3, 2009. It was on that day that Kessel made his Toronto Maple Leafs debut and the longest consecutive-games-played streak in NHL history began.

On October 25, 2022, Kessel's mixture of beat-up gear and more modern hockey protection was strapped onto his body as he suited up for his NHL-record 990th consecutive game. Kessel spent 13 straight years avoiding injuries, dips in play, and even an entire pandemic as his name was on his team's lineup card every night. He said there were plenty of close calls throughout the years, but his desire to play never wavered.

After tying Keith Yandle's record of 989 straight games the night before, Kessel broke the record during his first shift at SAP Center as the Vegas Golden Knights visited the San Jose Sharks for the team's eighth game of the year.

From the stands, Phil Kessel Sr. watched his son employ the same mentality he's had



from the start: If you're paid to do a job, you had better show up and do it.

"I've got to watch my kid play way past his youth days, and it's been nice for me because we've had the experience and we get to follow him around," Kessel Sr. said. "It gives us something else to think about."

The NHL's Ironman record wasn't the only slice of hockey history Kessel had on his plate that night. In the first period, he broke behind the San Jose defense and lifted his 400th NHL goal into the top left corner of the cage. Kessel became the 13th US-born player to join the 400-goal

club as he helped Vegas to a 4-2 win against the Sharks.

"That's how it works, right?" Kessel said. "It's a special night for me, it all worked out."

Kessel's night ended with a game puck from Mark Stone and a chant of "Phil! Phil! Phil! Phil!" echoing through the visitors' dressing room. The team welcomed the veteran forward with open arms from the beginning, but it was that night in San Jose that cemented Kessel as a Vegas Golden Knight.

"It's just a blessing," Kessel said. "I've loved every minute of it."

**PIETRANGELO** I think the thing that helped us the most as a group and probably Bruce as a coach was having success early because it allowed everybody to get on the same page and get on board to trust the system. If a new coach comes in and has a system implemented and it doesn't work, then nobody wants to follow it. We had so much success early on it was, like, "OK, this is going to work – this is good for our group."

Was it perfect? No. It probably took us 30 or 40 games to really have it become second nature for us. But we had success early, and I think that allowed everybody to be, like, "OK, let's get on the same page. This is something that could work for us."

**MARCHESSAULT** We came through for one another this season. We won for Jack the night we were in Buffalo. He was awesome, getting the hat trick and everything, but it was a team win. You could tell the way the guys mobbed him on the ice.

And he was emotional in the room after. It was a good moment for all of us – a building block for our team.

And we went into Boston – they were the best team in the league at that time, but we were right behind them, and we won for Bruce. We knew what it meant to him. And he was new to our group, but that's what we were like this year. We played for one another all the time. Same with Phil. We barely knew him, but we all felt part of his streak and wanted it to happen with a win. That night in the dressing room in San Jose, the picture with everyone around him – that was the start of some really good things happening for individuals but shared as a group thing.

**EICHEL** That night in Buffalo, up until then in my NHL career, I'd never felt more part of a team. Winning in the playoffs and getting the Cup has happened since. But the way the guys showed up that night and helped me through it, it was amazing.

**OPPOSITE** Jack Eichel's first hat trick as a Golden Knight came in his return to Buffalo on November 10.

